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ABSTRACT

The Alliance Project strives to increase the participation of minority institutions of higher education (MIHEs) in personnel preparation grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The project's primary purpose is to create a more diverse pool of special educators and related service providers. To be eligible under the MIHE umbrella, an institution must be a historically Black college or university or have 25 percent or more enrollment from underrepresented ethnic groups (excluding foreign students). Since its start in 1991, the project has assisted with 862 proposals submitted by MIHEs to the Office of Special Education Programs, and 226 of these were funded. In fiscal years 1997 and 1998, the success rates for proposals from historically Black colleges and tribal colleges were 30-40 percent. During its existence, the project has served faculty from 46 rural MIHEs, primarily tribal colleges and historically Black colleges. Typical activities include grant writing workshops, other seminars and meetings, and one-on-one mentoring to refine proposals. Seven current and recently funded project directors described the impact of federal funding on MIHE programs and on the teacher pool available to local rural school districts. Tips are offered to rural MIHEs for recruiting students into special education preparation programs and for retaining nontraditional students. Current services available to rural MIHEs through the Alliance Project are listed. (SV)

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THE ALLIANCE PROJECT: IT S IMPACT ON SPECIAL EDUCATION TEACHER PREPARATION EFFORTS IN RURAL AREAS

The *New* Alliance Project, funded by the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Program's (OSEP) Research to Practice Division, was developed in response to a federal mandate for the provision of technical assistance and information to Minority Colleges and Universities of Higher Education (P.L. 105-17). In order to be eligible under the Minority Institution of Higher Education (MIHE) umbrella, a college or university must be an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or have 25% or more student enrollment from underrepresented ethnic groups (excluding foreign students). The Project strives to increase MIHEs' participation in personnel preparation grants, contracts, and cooperative agreements in discretionary programs supported by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The primary goal of the Project is to increase the number of well-prepared teachers to serve children with disabilities, and who reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity of that population. Alliance also supports capacity-building and infrastructure reform within the MIHE personnel preparation programs in special education and related services to secure a systematic, ongoing program reflecting the transfer of relevant research to best practices in teacher preparation.

The Alliance Project: A Brief Overview

The Alliance Project, a continuation of a previous 6-year grant (formally The Alliance **2000** Project, housed at The University of New Mexico), provides opportunities for MIHE faculty to participate in awards for grants and contracts, boards of organizations, peer review panels, and professional development. The primary purpose of these activities is, again, to create a more diverse pool of special educators and related service providers who contribute high quality education to students with disabilities and their families. In November of 1997, after six successful years at the University of New Mexico, The *New* Alliance Project (referred to hereafter as The Alliance Project) Headquarters were moved to Peabody College at Vanderbilt University. All technical assistance and dissemination efforts for the project are coordinated at Vanderbilt.

The goals of The Alliance Project are to:

- Maintain a satisfactory level of submissions and funded proposals supporting special education and related service personnel preparation efforts at MIHE's, particularly for funds available through OSEP and state programs supported by IDEA.
- Support new Project Directors from MIHE's in the implementation of new funded projects.
- Implement effective practices and develop new models for recruiting and retaining diverse personnel for training and careers in special education and related services.
- Work with different constituent groups to assist in the development of partnerships with an array of agencies, organizations, and other funded projects.
- Establish a review panel and process to evaluate successful strategies for program development and enhancement.
- Facilitate MIHE faculty in developing conference presentations and journal publications to highlight their successful practices.
- Create and implement activities to support the goals developed in a collaborative effort between Alliance Headquarters and the Alliance Centers.

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Alliance Centers

The Alliance Project is composed of a national consortium including the Alliance Headquarters, a Washington DC Metropolitan Area Office, and four Alliance Centers. Each Center represents a principle constituent group, thus providing equitable access to information and activities as well as a forum for discussion and implementation of ideas. This national consortium includes:

- The Alliance Washington DC Metropolitan Office
- The Alliance Center for Tribal Colleges & Communities, located in Wilmot, SD.
- The Alliance Center for HBCU's & Predominately Black Colleges and Universities, located at Fayetteville State University in North Carolina.
- The Alliance Center for Hispanic Colleges and Universities, located at the BUENO Center at UC-Boulder in Colorado.
- The Alliance Center for Asian/Pacific Rim Colleges and Universities, located at California State University - Los Angeles.

This manuscript is a compilation of The Alliance Projects' technical assistance efforts with HBCUs and other MIHEs in preparing professionals to serve special populations in rural settings. **Rural**, in this instance, has been defined using the National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE) definition as a population of 25,000 or fewer.

The Alliance Impact: Nationwide

Data have been collected since the inception of the original Alliance 2000 Project. These data suggest a successful trend at MIHEs, showing significant gains in acquiring federal funding in order to recruit, retain, and better prepare personnel from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds to meet the needs of special populations. Table 1 illustrates the impact of Alliance's work with MIHEs.

Table 1
Highlights of Alliance Proposal Outcomes

HBCUS (approximately 44 have special education and/or rélated services programs)	196 proposals submitted to OSEP, 37 funded 19% success rate (equal to majority colleges and universities) 30% success rate in FY97 36% success rate in FY 98 at least 12 additional grants funded through other agencies (e.g., Office of Rehabilitation Services)
TRIBAL COLLEGES (12 have special education programs)	35 proposals submitted to OSEP, 9 funded 26% success rate overall 40% success rate in FY97 33% success rate in FY 98
Minority IHEs Overall (227 minority IHEs have special education and/or related service programs)	862 proposals submitted to OSEP with Alliance assistance 226 projects funded at 72 schools 308 colleges and universities served by Alliance 845 individual faculty have participated in Alliance activities
New Proposal Writers	132 proposals submitted to OSEP by new grant writers 76 received funding and are now OSEP Project Directors

Alliance Project Impact on Rural Schools

The focus on training special education personnel from diverse backgrounds for careers in rural areas is an important one. For example, 94% of public schools with high American Indian enrollments are in rural areas and small towns (Pavel, Curtin, & Whitener, 1997). Yet, OSEP (1996) reported that 35% of rural schools had special education teaching vacancies in 1990-91, increasing the demand for well-prepared teachers. Over its eight-year existence, the Alliance Project has served faculty from 46 different rural colleges and universities. This number seems quite small, particularly when the Project has served 308 schools in all, but take a moment to think of some settings that you would consider to be rural. For example, the University of Texas at Brownsville is considered to be rural by other definitions, yet the population of Brownsville is 132,000 (which is over 25,000 and thus disqualifies if from the NASDSE definition of rural). In fact, over half of the Alliance-served schools are in communities of 5,000 people or less. Table 2 provides a breakdown of Alliance-served schools by their community population.

The majority of the rural schools served by Alliance are Native American/American Indian Tribal Colleges or Universities and Historically Black Colleges and Universities. The Alliance Project has served or is currently serving 19 Native American schools, 18 HBCUs, 5 multi-ethnic schools, and 4 Hispanic schools in rural areas.

Table 2
Population of Communities of Schools Served by Alliance

Community Population	# of Rural Schools
20,000 – 25,000	3
15,000 – 20,000	5
10,000 – 15,000	7
5,000 – 10,000	6
1,000 – 5,000	18
< 1,000	7

Alliance participants are not restricted to the amount of assistance they can receive. Roughly one half (56%) of the participants from rural schools have sought assistance on just one occasion. Many others have been served twice, three times, and as many as eight times by the Alliance Project. Participants have, on average, been served twice. A typical relationship between Alliance and a participant may consist of attending a grant writing workshop to learn the basics of proposal writing, followed by one-on-one mentoring to refine a nearly completed grant application. Many of Alliance's activities are regionally located in major metropolitan areas where Alliance brings participants from rural schools for the activities. However, Alliance has also facilitated the attendance of people from rural schools by holding meetings in places such as Billings, Fond-du-Lac, Great Falls, and Bismarck. Meetings have been held in cities like Charlotte, NC for faculty from rural HBCUs . It should be noted that in addition to direct assistance through the activities listed above, Alliance has also served many faculty from rural schools through items and information available on its Product List. Alliance has assisted 130 faculty members at 46 rural MIHEs through a variety of activities. Table 3 summarizes the types of technical assistance provided.

Table 3
Alliance Activities

Activity Provided by Alliance	# of Participants
Grant Writing Workshop	83
Grant Writing Work Session	18
Washington DC Conference	39
Focus Seminars	24
Other Meetings	18
One-on-One Mentoring	68

As mentioned earlier, the purpose of the Alliance assistance is to enhance chances of securing grant funding in OSEP's personnel preparation competitions. This, in turn, will improve the MIHE special education programs and produce special education graduates with strong qualifications. Through Alliance assistance, 63 grant applications have been submitted. Most of these have been submitted to OSEP's Minority Institutions competition but there have also been some submitted to OSEP's other competitions. Thirteen grants have received funding at a total of 11 different schools. Prior to the work of the Alliance Project, only 4 rural MIHEs submitted proposals and only one was funded. It should be noted that the success rate of Alliance-served rural schools (13 out of 63, 21%) is just slightly less than the national success rate in OSEP competitions (24%).

Impact of Federal Funding in Rural Communities

Seven current and recently funded project directors provided information on the impact of the federal funding on their programs. These faculty come from schools ranging in size from 256 to 2600, with an average enrollment of 955. The average number of full-time faculty in the special education programs is 1.9, with a range of zero to 6. In addition, these departments rely on part-time (average of 1.3) and adjunct (average of 1.9) faculty. The number of students enrolled in the special education programs ranged from 25 to 275, with an average program size of 114.

Impact on MIHEs

Five of the schools surveyed were tribal colleges, one was an HBCU, and one was a predominately Hispanic school. As a result, the students recruited through these grants were Native American, African American, and Hispanic. The students tended to be older and female.

Two of the grants supported associate degrees for paraprofessionals in special education; two supported individuals in undergraduate programs; and, three supported students in graduate programs. At least 116 students have currently completed their programs, graduated, or received certification to date; many more are still in the pipeline. All project directors actively recruited - and retained - persons from diverse backgrounds

For five of the schools surveyed, the impact of the federal funding on their programs was crucial to the development of the program. With the "seed money" provided by the government, several schools were able to develop special education programs, or concentrations such as bilingual special education, where none had existed in the past, hire faculty and recruit students. For three of the four schools whose funding has ended, the number of students in the program has been maintained. In addition, the program has become institutionalized by the college. Because of the students in the grant, classes that would otherwise have been cancelled due to low enrollment were retained. In addition, two schools indicated that the overall enrollment in their special education program had increased due to the increased visibility of the project.

Impact on Local School Districts

The outlying school districts surrounding these schools often look to the graduates of the teacher preparation programs to meet their demand for qualified professionals – a demand which is often difficult to meet due to the unique challenges posed by living in remote areas. Because the majority of the students in the grant-supported programs were recruited from the local communities, and these students stayed in the communities after graduation, the impact on the local schools was significant. The number of school districts served by each rural MIHE ranged from two local districts to approximately 100 (the school served a large tri-state area). With the exception of the MIHE that served the 100 district area, the average number of local school districts served by the rural MIHEs was 6.3.

To date, the schools surveyed here have provided over 100 professionals to 42 local school districts. Many of these graduates are in high demand; graduates from one program have all received a minimum of three job offers. All but three of the graduates to date have returned to local districts after completion of their program. Of those three, one continued on in school for an additional degree, one became the special education coordinator for a Headstart program, and one became the college's registrar. As a result of these successful training grants, rural - and often remote - districts that typically have great difficulty recruiting special education teachers acquired quality professionals to work with students with disabilities with little recruitment effort.

Recruitment and Retention Tips From Those Who Know

In contrast to colleges and universities in urban and suburban areas, institutions of higher education in rural areas often face unique challenges when recruiting students into their special education teacher preparation programs. Unlike the urban schools, students may travel greater distances to attend these schools and require increased financial support if they must live away from home in dorms, in off-campus housing, etc. As a result, the faculty in these programs must devise innovative means of recruiting potential special educators into their programs. Funds from federal grant competitions afford much needed financial assistance to special education teacher training programs in order to initiate new programs, enhance existing programs, and – most importantly - provide student support. However, funding alone is not enough to ensure high numbers of quality recruits.

Recruitment

Here are some tips from the experts (those who have successfully recruited and trained in rural areas).

Tip #1: *Getting by with a little help from your friends.* School district personnel can provide names and contacts of individuals who would be prime candidates for special education personnel preparation training. Paraprofessionals who are residents of the local communities, general education teachers interested in changing teaching areas, and parents are all excellent recruits referred by local districts.

Tip#2: *Beat the bushes*! Flyers and brochures alone just don't do the job. Recruitment is hard work and requires an intensive initial investment. These project directors were present in local community organization meetings, church services, local high schools, and a variety of other places where potential recruits can be found.

Tip #3: *Word of mouth.* The old adage is not true: Good news does travel fast. Once the information is out in the community, particularly when a cohort of students is progressing through or has completed the program, the recruitment efforts of the project directors decreased as interested students contacted them. One project director had more applicants than the program could accommodate! Another said, "My best recruiters are my students from earlier cohorts. They do a fantastic job." The importance of recruiting

within the communities, which then relieves the pressures for those who would otherwise have to travel across- or out-of-state to attend college was noted. One faculty member wrote, "Venturing off to get the degree wasn't even a reality. Our program allows students to complete a four-year degree and never leave home."

Retention in Training Programs

Yet, recruitment alone is not enough. Students from nontraditional backgrounds face barriers and hurdles to academic achievement that must be considered carefully and addressed in a proactive manner. Again, tips from the experts provide a myriad of ideas for those looking to improve their current retention rates.

Tip #1: *Create a safety net.* The faculty members we interviewed served as the advisors for the grant-supported students. They maintained close and constant communication with the students on their grant, and followed up if a student missed classes. One school even had a retention officer (yes, that is the official position title!) whose sole responsibility was to follow up on students and help them address whatever barrier had kept them out of class. Faculty assisted the students as they negotiated the college or university system, helped them develop their program of studies and helped make decisions about coursework. As one faculty member said, "I ran interference on campus with all the administrivia (that could be quite frustrating for the students)". For students who were having academic difficulties, faculty members found academic support for them (many times providing intense individual tutoring). Peer mentoring, along with faculty and staff mentoring, was an important component as well.

Tip #2: *Beyond the norm.* The grant funding can be used to provide additional support beyond the typical tuition, books, and stipends. Older students may need childcare costs reimbursed. Students who travel long distances to class are especially appreciative of mileage reimbursements.

Tip #3: *Professional gold stars.* Local school district administrators, particularly those experiencing shortages of qualified special educators, were particularly helpful in certain areas. For example, some school districts allowed currently employed paraprofessionals to leave school to attend classes that eventually led to an undergraduate degree. The students earned a degree without the hassles of evening courses; the school district got newly certified teachers. Other teachers who received an additional certification, such as in bilingual special education, became master teachers in their districts upon completion of the program. One project director wrote, "Many of the schools have had our students do training for teachers and aids on the new things they've learned in our ed program."

Tip #4: *Students first.* Because traditional and even some evening classes were difficult for the students to attend, many of the faculty we interviewed held their courses on weekends. Although teaching weekend courses was not the first choice of these faculty, they realized that in order for the program to be effective, it needed to be accessible to students. Classes held in desirable time slots for faculty but have no students do neither the program, the college, (and eventually the faculty member if her classes are cancelled) any good. Course content was also designed in consideration of the cultural background of the students. Culturally sensitive instructional methods, strategies, and content were infused into the curriculum.

Current Services Available to Rural MIHEs through the Alliance Project

For faculty members at MIHEs who are interested in enhancing their programs by obtaining special education personnel training funds, The Alliance Project is available to provide technical assistance in accessing OSEP funding. Support is provided through the following activities:

Regional Grant Writing Workshops provide technical training on the specific outline, format and content for grant submission to OSEP's Research to Practice Division's competitions.

Regional Briefing Sessions are short sessions that provide updates on the latest changes in OSEP competition information and evaluation criteria for experienced grant writers.

Regional Work Sessions provide an opportunity for participants to collaborate side-by-side with mentors and content experts in a concerted effort to revise a previously unsuccessful application for submission to an upcoming competition.

Mentorships provide a one-on-one relationship as a support system while the participant is engaged in writing an application for submission.

Pre-Review Consultations review and critique and application prior to actual submission.

Information Resources provided by items from the Alliance Product List offer the participant cutting-edge information, examples of exemplary abstracts and funded proposals, as well as a vast variety of support data for use when preparing an application for submission.

In conjunction with the technical support component of the Project, individual professional development activities are also available. Included in these activities are topical seminars and national and regional conferences. Dissemination of information and funding support for all activities are channeled through the Alliance Centers, *Alliance Alerts* via email (and occasionally slow mail) from Headquarters and through the quarterly *Alliance Newsletter*.

If you are a faculty member at an MIHE interested in receiving technical assistance in proposal preparation, contact the Alliance Headquarters at (800) 831-6134, or at alliance@vanderbilt.edu. Additional information is available through our Web page: www.alliance2k.org.

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